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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the various components of the cultural orientation program as it has developed at the Bilingual Educational Institute (BEI), the organization that is currently awarded the grant for RSS in the Houston area by the state of Texas. This cultural orientation program's topics include the following: employment; healthcare; community organizations; workplace; transportation; housing; crime prevention; consumer issues; education; citizenship; welfare reform; government agencies; and finance. This cultural orientation program serves newly arrived refugees and community groups that interact with refugees. A description is provided of various aspects of the program: the orientation for refugees, the training provided to instructors, instructor assessment, and cultural information provided to the community about refugees. (KFT)

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# A Comprehensive Cultural Orientation Program for Refugees

## INTRODUCTION

I will present the various components of the Cultural Orientation Program as it has developed at the Bilingual Educational Institute (hereafter referred to as BEI), the organization that is currently awarded the grant for RSS in the Houston area by the Texas Department of Human Services-Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs. I will first provide a description of the orientation for refugees followed by a description of the training provided for the instructors, then a description of the instructor guide and assessment and finally a description of the cultural information provided to the community about refugees including workshops and written information. While the Cultural Orientation Program serves two groups in the Houston area:

Newly arrived refugees
Community Groups that interact with refugees

the heart of the program is a cultural orientation for refugees given approximately 30 days after their arrival. This cultural orientation consists of a three hour presentation in the native language about specific topics of interest. The current topics are: employment, health care, community organizations, workplace, transportation, housing, crime prevention, consumer issues, education, citizenship, welfare reform, government agencies and finance. These topics are periodically updated so that the information is as accurate as

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possible. While there are three topics given in the three hour period, refugees are eligible to return and to receive an orientation about any of the topics. Different instructors deliver the orientation in different ways - depending on their own inclination as well as knowledge of their clients. BEI subcontracts the refugee cultural orientations to VOLAGs in the area (in Houston -YMCA and Interfaith Ministries). They provide the instructors from among their caseworkers. Thus since the instructors are caseworkers and, for the most part, former refugees, and are giving the orientation to their own clients (or clients from their agency), they are very familiar with the needs of the clients and choose the topics accordingly. For example, a Bosnian instructor (who is also a caseworker with Bosnian clients) would probably not choose to present the module on transportation in as much as most of the Bosnians are familiar with using buses and other public transportation. If she/he were to present anything about transportation, it would be about specific routes that the refugees use daily. However, a Somali instructor (who is also a caseworker with Somali clients) might present the entire module with an exercise on exactly how to ride a bus as a result of knowing that his/her clients are of rural origin and have little or no experience using public transportation. Again some instructors present bits of information from other modules knowing that their clients need specific information from more than one module. Others present three modules very thoroughly. While the option of giving three one hour orientations on separate occasions is available, it is rarely used. The reason for this is that the logistics of gathering the newly arrived refugees (the state insists that refugees be in the U.S.A. for

at least one month) together is problematic at best - to do so on three occasions is an enormous amount of effort and time. Child care is available and the instructors arrange for snacks to be available.

At the end of the orientation, each refugee is given a copy of the resource guide. This guide is currently printed in English and Vietnamese with a glossary in Spanish and Bosnian. It contains a brief description (usually about a page) of specific services that are offered to refugees. It also lists the eligibility requirements, address, phone number and languages (other than English) that are available at that agency. It is periodically updated for accuracy as well as current language of refugees in the Houston area. (Show copy of resource guide.)

BEI provides training for the cultural instructors. This training usually lasts for a day and consists of basic information about the nature of culture and cultural communication styles, instructions for the paperwork involved in providing cultural orientations, and demonstrations of effective methods. They are also presented a model comparing American and other cultural values as well as information about the various stages of the cultural adjustment cycle. At the end of their training instructors are given an instructor guide.

This guide contains modules on the13 topics about which cultural orientations are given. Each module begins with an overview of the module including the objectives and the materials (handouts and/or audio visuals needed). Each module contains information about the topic as well as exercises that the instructor can use with

the clients - if appropriate. A sample for each of the 13 modules follows:

1. Employment - includes information on where to look for a job, job applications and job interviews as well as job training programs that are available.
2. Health Issues-includes information on the organizations that offer health care, the major health problems faced by refugees (tuberculosis, Hepatitis B and parasites) and preventive health care.
3. Education-includes information on the educational system in the USA, how to register children in school and the opportunities of adult education - including ESL.
4. Finance-includes information on how to open a bank account, write a check and fill out a deposit or withdrawal slip.
5. Government agencies-includes information on social security locations and application, Immigration and Naturalization Service application forms, Internal Revenue Service tax form and employment related offices.
6. Community based organizations-includes information on the variety of services offered, the intake forms and role plays.
7. Workplace-includes information on the expectations of an employer, employer obligations and rights and a sample performance evaluation.
8. Housing-includes information on where to look for housing, landlord and tenant responsibilities and rights, public housing and purchasing a home
9. Transportation-includes information on the bus system, the driver's license procedure and basic public safety precautions.

10. Crime prevention-includes information on the role of the police and important phone numbers, crime prevention and the U.S. judicial system.

11. Citizenship-includes information on the benefits of becoming a citizen and the procedure for becoming a citizen as well as forms and fees.

12. Welfare reform-includes information on social security, medicaid, TANF, and food stamps.

13. Consumer issues-includes information on exchanges and refunds, the Bureau of Better business, consumer responsibilities and rights, major purchase and personal finances including planning a budget and consumer credit counseling.

The modules are periodically reviewed and updated - especially the modules on employment or social services. In fact, this requires constant monitoring. I have attempted to have the instructors inform me when material is inadequate or inaccurate. This has proven to be more effective with some instructors than with others.

The workshops are assessed in a variety of ways. Assessment is done on one out of every workshops (the instructor decides how to choose which workshops in which to do this). The following assessments are done:

1. the instructor assesses whether the clients have adequately learned the material. There are a series of questions which the instructor answers in order to determine this.

2. the participants are given a pre-test over the main points to be presented (in their own language) and at the end are given a post-test.

3. the participants assess the quality of the instruction for the workshop.

Forms for each of these assessments are translated into the various languages of the refugees and are available for all the instructors.

In addition to the cultural orientation provided to the refugees themselves, three hour workshops on the cultural background of refugees and their experience in the United States are provided to organizations that deal with refugees. These include the school systems where the refugee children study, the employers of refugees, community service organizations such as mental health providers, social workers and police.

These workshops include information on the adjustment cycle of individuals moving into a new culture, information on different cultural communication styles, suggestions for effective cross cultural communication, a model for understanding the different cultural values of American culture and the refugee culture(s), the impact of culture bumps on relationships, and culture specific information about the refugees in the organization for whom the workshop is being given. The workshop is a forum in which the participants can grapple with the questions of how to best utilize the human potential of the refugees and enrich the company or school culture in which they work or study. Each workshop participant receives a folder with the information and suggested readings. These workshops can be given in 3 hour blocks or 1-1/2 hour blocks if needed. Employers are identified from the job developers at the VOLAGs and the schools are identified from the VOLAG caseworkers. Some organizations call requesting workshops e.g. a

hospice in the Houston area. BEI has a brochure which it distributes so that various organizations can become aware of the service.

Culture specific information about Somali, Kurdish, Bosnian and Iraqui culture has been summarized from the books published by the Center for Applied Linguistics. These 3-4 page summaries are distributed to the school system where refugee children study as well as employers of refugees and any other groups that might interact with refugees. While the full information about how to get the full-length books is presented, it is felt that many people will read 3-4 pages while they might not read 40 pages. Each of the summaries was given to a number of refugees from the culture in question to make sure the information is accurate. In addition, a summary about Vietnamese culture has also been produced.

Of course, all of these services are provided free of charge. Therefore, the orientation program deals with both sides of the coin - meeting the immediate cultural information needs of refugees after they have arrived in the United States as well as the cultural information needs of the American-born Americans with whom they live and work.